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ABSTRACT

The complexity of the writing process makes it more useful to isolate a variety of processes or parts of processes that can be taught and learned. A narrow view of writing as product leads to a misinterpretation of the process as a definite sequence--prewriting, writing, rewriting--when in fact it is much more recursive. Proper analysis of product directs our attention to the goals of process and to specific parts of process that can be investigated. One view of process is as a combination of analysis and synthesis or an alternation between them; another is as the combination of generalizing and specifying; while a third approach sees the writing process as creating and revealing relationships, both linear and hierarchical. Linear relationships appear in the limited and identifiable linear patterns of prose. Hierarchical relationships, traditionally labeled as being part of organization, are usually discussed in terms of outlines and formulas for paragraphs. This type of analysis of relationships does not provide much practical help for the writer, but the creation of these relationships is the writing process. (JL)

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HOW TO MAKE MULLIGAN STEW: PROCESS AND PRODUCT AGAIN

Écrire, c'est déranger le dictionnaire.--Jean Cocteau

In composition I do not think second thoughts are best.--Lord Byron

Composition is, for the most part, an effort of slow diligence and steady perseverance.--Samuel Johnson

Mulligan, according to one desk dictionary, is a stew "of vegetables, meat or fish, and other foodstuffs." An essay, in the same dictionary, is "an analytic or interpretative literary composition usually dealing with its subject from a limited or personal point of view" or "something resembling such a composition." The definitions are about equally imprecise, suggesting that products in each genre are likely to vary considerably. If I want to learn how to produce either a mulligan stew or an essay, I have to look beyond a definition or a recipe.

If I want to learn about the process of composing a stew, I can conduct research. I can interview various stewmakers, for example. I can watch them in action and take notes on what they do. Or I can put a microphone in front of them, getting them to recite what they think goes on in their minds as they peel turnips or stir the broth or decide whether to add cumin or oregano. I can check

CS206853

on whether a chef's hat or apron seems to have much to do with the process. I can analyze protocols and generalize about procedures that seem to characterize many of the cooks. I can perhaps identify different parts of the process--selecting and preparing ingredients, putting them together and cooking, tasting the results and seasoning--preparing, cooking, and revision--invention, arrangement, style. I can observe that these steps are not necessarily sequential; that for instance the cook may be selecting material even at the last stages, tasting and deciding to use more garlic. I can also, of course, make a stew myself and think about how I do it, a kind of research that seems to me important, and often neglected. I can also do a lot of stew tasting, analyzing what I eat and relating the results to how they were achieved. This has the possibly misleading advantage of being the most pleasant kind of research, but it has the real advantage of allowing the investigator to examine the product as a way of finding out about the process, and to select only successful products.

I'm aware that this is mainly nonsense, but it leads me to some things I want to say about current enthusiasms in research, particularly about what we are calling the composing process. I think we have been learning something about the composing process--not only about the frequency with which a tenth-grader chews ~~his~~ a pencil, but also about the psychological events attendant

on getting something from the mind on to paper. I do not propose to criticize--or expand--current theories about the composing process. Rather I want to look at composing as a simple-minded stewmaker, to try to do some summarizing and ordering, and especially to urge that we should be thinking not of the composing process but of composing processes.

The search for the writing process seems to me to push the investigator toward conclusions too general to be useful or too trivial to be significant. (You should consider your purpose before starting the stew, or, some stewmakers like to sing as they stir.) The problem is that the writing process is so complex and so varied, as much current useful research is showing, that discussions of the process seem often to have the zeal, but also only the success of the medieval alchemist. On the other hand, I think that it is possible to isolate a number of processes or parts of the process, skills or techniqes, if you will, that can usefully be taught and learned.

Identifying these involves the current concern to separate "process" and "product." There has been a justified reaction against the kind of rhetorical research that concentrates exclusively on the product, guessing about the ingredients of the stew, outlining the structure of the essay. The focus on the product encourages serious misconceptions about the process.

This focus tempts us to assume that patterns that ultimately appear on paper parallel what goes on in the mind to produce those patterns. Of course they do not. To take a simple example, subject-verb-complement order is characteristic of the English sentence. It does not follow that the parts of a sentence occur to a writer in this order, that sentences are conceived because a writer picks a subject and then thinks of something to say about it. Usually it is an action or occurrence. what is ultimately expressed in a predicate, that stimulates the expression of a sentence. It seems unlikely that a sentence like "The dog is chewing the bone" would occur because a speaker thought of a dog and searched about for a verb and object to go with it. A writer more often than a speaker may think first of a subject, but in most instances the sequence in the product does not reflect what happens in the mind. That order is often indeterminate, with the thoughts that are to make up the sentence occurring almost simultaneously.

Similarly, a paragraph does not necessarily occur because a writer has thought of a thesis and wants to defend it, even though the paragraph may ultimately take the form of a generalization followed by various kinds of support. The writer may have been stimulated to write by an observation, by reading a striking sentence, by becoming annoyed, or what not. A thesis or generalization may have occurred to him only after much other mental

activity. The paragraph may come out with some clearly discernible hierarchical pattern, but the writer's thoughts have not necessarily come to him as a formal outline.

Recent studies have been much concerned with one misinterpretation of this sort--the assumption that prewriting, writing, and rewriting or invention, arrangement, and style--are a sequence in the writing process. Writers have been pointing out--more persuasively, it seems to me, than should be necessary--that composing is "recursive," that writers do not progress through three neatly defined sequential stages from prewriting to writing or revision.[1] Observing that these three kinds of activities do occur when writing occurs does not justify an assumption that they are sequential. All three of these parts of the process occur over and over before anything gets finished. But realizing that these do not necessarily occur in sequence does not alter the fact that they are composing processes, the results of which can be observed in a product.

Donald Murray says, "The process of making meaning with written language can not be understood by looking backward from a finished page. Process can not be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from a sausage."[2] It is, of course, not easy to infer a pig from a sausage--but it is difficult to turn a pig into a sausage--or a cow into a stew--if you've never seen a

sausage--or tasted mulligan. The pig is not the process, although it is essential to the process. The sausage is also relevant to the process. The process is not an image of the product, and assuming that it is has led to some confusing teaching. But assuming that it is unrelated has led to limited notions of the writing process.

That is, so long as we distinguish process and product, the product can give us the most tangible information we can get about at least part of the process. Analysis of the product reveals the goal or end of the process, directs us to specific parts of the process that we can investigate. We know, for example, that thoughts, however they may occur, get transformed into words in subject-verb order to produce sentences. The way in which this occurs is not obvious or simple, but this part of the process offers a focus for study. Or we know that thoughts may get translated into various sorts of heirarchical patterns in an essay. We can illuminate an important part of the composing process by trying to discover how thoughts can get put into order.

I am, in other words, issuing a mild warning that in many current studies of the writing process, we are neglecting important and tangible processes that are part of writing, that require us to consider the product, to taste the stew as well as watch the cook. By looking at what has been done we can see what has to be done and then work on ways of doing it. What we discover, I think, often provides the most useful and practical help in

dealing with writing--by describing composing processes. I want to mention just a few examples.

One example, one of the composing processes that I consider both important and practical, is the process of juggling and relating analysis and synthesis and specific and general. Two speres of the human brain apparently govern two different operations. One, usually the left, deals with what may be called logical procedures such as analysis. The other is concerned more with emotions and larger ideas, with wholes or synthesis. Writing, as a function of the entire brain, requires the cooperation of both spheres, requires looking at both parts and wholes, for instance. That is, writing can be thought of as a combination of analysis and synthesis, sometimes a kind of alternation between them. These two ways of looking at the world, at the forest or at the trees, characterize our thinking and also one writing process. Whether we are trying to get writing started or to arrange or organize material or to construct paragraphs or sentences, we are likely to be combining synthesis and analysis.

Or, with a different emphasis, we can describe the process as a combination of generalizing and specifying. Whenever we write, we are trying to refine thinking by taking it farther toward the specific. But at the same time, we are trying to help a reader understand how to make sense of a mass of details by making general comments

about the specifics. This, among the many writing processes, has the advantage of being teachable. It is possible to learn more about handling synthesis and analysis, about dealing with the general and the specific.

Another composing process is the process of creating and revealing relationships. Writers do not create new things or new facts, usually do not even dig out much new information. Writers do relate things and facts as they individually see them and want to report them to readers. A cook doesn't create carrots or celery, but a cook may create an individual stew by selecting and arranging ingredients in a new way. The relationships we create and reveal in writing can be indentified in two ways, as linear and as hierarchical.

The writing process is obviously linear. We have to put one thing after another--one letter, one word, one sentence, one paragraph after another. The observation is so obvious that we tend to overlook it, but by thinking of prose as a sequence we can get new insights into ways of generating ideas and keeping them in order.

That is, we can observe in the product that there are certain linear patterns in prose and that these are limited and identifiable. Each unit of expression--a single word or a paragraph--limits and influences what follows. I have in other places talked about writing as

a series of commitments and responses; every statement both responds in some way to what has preceded and directs what is to follow. And I have argued that the kinds of possible responses are limited and identifiable--as further generalization, diversion, repetition, specification, or parallelism. Ross Winterowd has suggested the same sort of thing in defining the possible relationships between ideas as coordinate, obversative, causative, conclusive, alternative, inclusive, and sequential. He points out that certain conjunctions typically express these relationships.[3]

The composing process can be viewed as the struggle to arrange words and sentences in the sequence that achieves the desired relationships. I am not suggesting that the patterns that can be observed in the product are the process. But the process is the attempt to achieve the product, and to that extent is defined by the product. The writer's thoughts, trial-and-error creations, thinking, writing, and revising, are all directed toward these patterns of linear relationships, which give prose continuity.

But writing is also a process of creating hierarchical relationships, making some ideas depend on others. Patterns of hierarchical relationships are traditionally part of what textbooks label organization, and they get described most commonly in discussions of outlining or

in formulas for creating paragraphs. Outlines are most frequently produced as orderly descriptions of a product, although they are also often prescribed, usually unrealistically, as part of a writing process. Paragraph patterns also, the hierarchical arrangements of sentences, are illustrated by examples of existing paragraphs. The debates about what is a paragraph, if it is anything, whether it must have a topic sentence or a conclusion, are argued primarily by collecting examples of one view or another. Indeed, there has been a good deal of time devoted to providing data on the percentage of paragraphs in modern magazines having a topic sentence or extending for more or less than a hundred words. It is hard to know how to apply this kind of information to the writing process. If, for example, we learn from research that only 57% of modern paragraphs begin with topic sentences, do we try to hit the same average in what we write, or do we abandon topic sentences as unnecessary, or do we forget the whole thing? Analysis of the relationships in the written essay does not tell us how to write, but the creation of those relationships is a writing process. As we write we are constantly make making decisions, consciously or unconsciously, about which words or broad ideas will be subordinated, which coordinated. We classify, arrange, rearrange. We consider relevance. The writing process can be thought of as a process of ordering and relating ideas, attempting to achieve hierarchical patterns like some of those that can be described by

analysis of the product.

There are other writing processes, or ways of looking at the process, but I think these make my point. I am pleased by the current emphasis on writing as process rather than product, partly, I suppose, because I thought we had always been teaching the writing process. But I don't want our view of the composing process to become so narrow that we neglect difficult but useful parts of the process or fail to take advantage of analysis of the product for its value in illuminating the process. The problem is to find out all we can about how you get from an empty refrigerator to an edible stew, from a blank sheet of paper and a relatively unfocused mind--if not an empty one--to a readable essay. You can't learn to make a stew just by examining or even eating one, but neither can you learn to make one if you don't know what you're trying to make--any more than you can come back from where you've never been.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Sondra Perl, "Understanding Composing," College Composition and Communication, 31 (December, 1980), p. 364 ff.; and Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," College Composition and Communication, 31 (December 1980), pp. 378-391.

2. "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning," Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland, (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1980), p. 3.

3. "The Grammar of Coherence," College English, 31 (May, 1970), pp. 828-835.